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ABSTRACT

The contributions of V. O. Key, Jr., to the field of public opinion studies is examined through reviews of issues and opinions contained in two of Key's books, "Public Opinion and American Democracy" and "The Responsible Electorate." Key is described as being much less concerned with what public opinion is than what it does in the area of public affairs. A description of the contents of "Public Opinion and American Democracy" is presented, and Key's interests concerning how politically influential persons shape public opinion and how this affects the formation of authoritative decision-making are highlighted. Key's interest in the role of the common man in the electorate process is described in "The Responsible Electorate," and comparisons of and a justification for the philosophical differences which appear in the two books are made. (JHP)

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V. O. KEY, JR., AND THE STUDY OF PUBLIC OPINION

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In the vast armory of skills which V. O. Key brought to the study of politics, one of the lesser perhaps, but nonetheless memorable, was his talent as a wordsmith. I have ever found it hard to ponder problems of public opinion without my head fairly ringing with his felicitous phrases. If, for example, I were asked to nominate the single truest sentence that has ever been written about the study of public opinion, I would not hesitate for a moment. The sentence is "To speak with precision of public opinion is a task not unlike coming to grips with the Holy Ghost." Most of us who talk about public opinion in print write that sentence sooner or later; but in quotation marks, because V. O. Key said it first.

The sentence comes, of course, from the opening pages of Key's magisterial opus entitled Public Opinion and American Democracy. If one is asked to review V. O. Key on the subject of public opinion, this volume, his next-to-last published in 1964, is a natural place to look. This is not to say, of course, that public opinion phenomena only became of concern to Key late in his career. Given his permanent conviction as to the basic wisdom of democracy, the subject had long commanded Key's attention, and his persisting interest in it is easy to see over the course of his splendid sequence of earlier works on

American politics. Nonetheless, if we ask after Key's final architectonic summation of a lifetime of rumination on public opinion, it is clearly provided in this volume, and I shall naturally pay close attention to it. At the same time, this final summation was not quite final: there was a postscript being completed when death interrupted, entitled The Responsible Electorate. This postscript took back nothing which had been said in the larger work, but added much. The scholarly impact of "this little book", as Key called it, was out of all proportion to its physical size, and it would be hard to render Key on public opinion without taking it into account as well.

I feel some special kinship with the volume Public Opinion and American Democracy because it was shaped and largely written during the course of the year which V. O. Key spent in our shop at the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan in 1959-60. I personally missed the fun and stimulation: I set out for Europe a week or two before Professor and Mrs. Key arrived in Ann Arbor, and returned some weeks after they had departed. However, the manuscript of The American Voter had been put to bed that very summer of their arrival, and my co-authors were full of pleasurable stories of that visit when I returned.

The fact of that visit helps remind us that not all of V. O. Key's contributions to the study of public opinion rest within the covers of his professional publications on the subject. For one thing, his backstage influence in his role with the Political Behavior Committee of the Social Science Research Council had been consequential at the beginning of the 1950s in securing the funding which launched the

Michigan election studies. His sojourn to Ann Arbor to work with some of the accumulated data lent a degree of legitimacy to the enterprise within the discipline of political science which had up to that time been lacking.

He was a godsend in other ways as well. True to his stern ethic of three pages written before breakfast each day, he arrived at the Institute for Social Research bright of a Sunday morning to find smoke pouring out of a coffee heater left on the night before. The old building would have been a tinderbox; and the many boxes of IBM cards and interview protocols, including the first five national election studies, would have smoldered nicely as well. This heroic episode has long been remembered locally as the time that V. O. saved the study of public opinion single-handedly.

I

The Responsible Electorate was designed from the outset as a brief and punchy book devoted to a single major thesis. In contrast, Public Opinion and American Democracy had textbook aspirations, and this in turn saddled the author with a large book and the imperatives of "coverage." As a result, we find Key in these pages writing about a number of subjects which were less than second nature to him, such as social psychological studies of attitude persuasion, or sociological views about class awareness, or political socialization in the family. In these passages he writes with a good deal of diffidence, frequently framing propositions with phrases such as "or at least so we are told by the experts." Of course some of the surface diffidence is hard to

distinguish from the posture of the simple country boy which Key often used to remarkable effect in gently budging a conversation partner back in the general direction of more sensible thought; and although he feigned considerable ignorance about some of the landscape he is obliged to lead the reader through, in these pages of pure "coverage" his intellectual taste in seizing upon some bodies of then-current work and letting others die an unremarked death was as always splendid.

In short, a certain amount of the ground covered in this treatise is derivative, and does not pretend to be otherwise. But there is no lack of clarity as to the more singular contribution Key wanted the book to make. This purpose, as stated crisply in the Preface, is "to place the newer knowledge about public opinion" [from sociology and psychology] "in a political context" (p. vii). Thus the book stems from the same concerns which motivated several of Key's contributions in the post-war period: an interest in getting politics back into the picture where other disciplines, whatever intellectual strides they were making at the time, were typically insensitive.

Given this aim, Key is much less concerned with microcosmic questions as to what "public opinion" <u>is</u> than he is with what it <u>does</u> in the arena of public affairs. His introduction to the subject dutifully reviews the classic literature which discusses what "opinion" might be said to be, along with what a "public" might be said to be, all by way of deducing what "public opinion" truly is. But after some labor he sets all this aside to resort to a simpler "working definition" on which the rest of the volume floats, which identifies public opinion as "those opinions held by private persons which

governments find it prudent to heed" (p. 14).

Public opinion for Key is inseparable from the political nexus with which it interacts. This theme is pursued almost relentlessly, and in one manifestation or another constitutes most of the fresh contribution which the volume makes. The text rarely strays for long from the chief questions of interaction: how do political elites influence the shape of public opinion?; and how does public opinion impact upon the formation of authoritative decision-making?

Concomitantly Key's efforts to break new ground in this volume had less to do with the structure of opinion in the mind than it did with the more aggregated structure of opinion in the electorate. To be sure, tucked in the middle of the book is a short section entitled "Properties" of public opinion, which is about as intrapsychic as the text ever becomes. In two of these chapters Key discusses variations in attitude intensity and st ability in a vein which is relatively derivative and in a curious way inconclusive. Thus for example two of the major points in the treatment of intensity are that it is a property which is very hard to measure compellingly and in any event we know far too little as to how if at all expressed attitude intensity affects behavioral outcomes. The other chapter in this Section, devoted to a property Key called "latency," is rather more unique, and provides a useful avenue back to his primary concern for the political context of opinion. Latency refers to opinion which is merely "potential" or not yet crystallized. On the political side, it is readily tied to Friedrich's rule of anticipated reactions, and the proposition is developed that some of the very power of public opinion

resides in the difficulty of predicting what opinions will be activated by given events, and how long the arousal will last. Even the very Holy Ghostliness of public opinion serves to keep elites honest.

But this Section tucked away in the middle of the book is intentionally upstaged by what Key really wants to talk about, which is the aggregate profile of public opinion across the electorate. This subject, sometimes entirely missing from even current textbook treatments of public opinion, and still more novel in its day, occupies the lead Section in the book under the title "Patterns of Distribution."

In this Section, two broad aspects of the distribution of opinion in the population are introduced. The first involves what we would think of as the variance displayed by any given opinion, ranging from zero, or perfect consensus among the citizenry, to very large, which reflects substantial polarization of opinion, and likely political conflict, on the issue. The second is a consideration which cross-cuts the first but is at least as important: it involves what Key labelled the "concentration" of opinion, or put more operationally, the proportion of citizens even holding any opinions on an issue.

It is not difficult to see strong political implications in both of these aspects of opinion distribution, if by "strong political implications" we mean facets of opinion among the governed which the governors must heed most. This is, of course, why Key gives these properties of public opinion absolutely front-and-center billing. But it is equally easy to defend a claim that the discipline, while not

exactly ignoring these topics, still leaves them two decades later rather underdeveloped.

These implications are of course most straightforward where the shape of the univariate distribution of held opinions is concerned, and here there has indeed been some theoretical inquiry in the recent period. In fact, before Key wrote, Downs (1957) had already pointed out how sensitive the dynamics of electoral politics are not merely to the level of consensus or cleavage captured by the univariate variance, but even on to more esoteric details such as the skew of opinion or its multimodality. These are distributional concepts all. And there is little in the more recent burgeoning of public choice literature on electoral systems to diminish our respect for the acute importance of variability in such opinion distributions, at least at a theoretical level. This statement is meant to include not only discussions of equilibria in formal voting systems, but also work such as Fiorina's (1974) on representation, pivoting as it does on the heterogeneity or homogeneity of within-district opinion, which is more or less another vocabulary for consensus and cleavage.

Meanwhile it must be confessed that it is hard to think of much empirical work which attends to variability in the aggregated shape of opinion distributions. To some degree this lack of emphasis may reflect a caution which is entirely commendable: our modes of measuring public opinion are crude, to say the least. For much of our work we are satisfied if we can at least have confidence that the relative differences in the gross pro-con division of opinion from one subgroup to another have some validity, without putting much more

weight on the details of the absolute numbers at all. It is almost frightening to contemplate far more delicate calibrations, such as would be required to pronounce whether opinion in an electorate was "really" distributed unimodally, bimodally, trimodally or in some other n-modal fashion, independent of measurement artifacts.

At the same time we may be a little more cautious than the situation warrants, given the theoretical stakes which Key as well as Downs could see in these questions of macrodistribution. One of the more pleasant surprises which my collaborator Roy Pierce and I experienced in working on our recent study of political representation in France has involved just such distributional analyses. In a setting where at least some voters make keen discriminations between zones with labels like "center-left," "extreme-left" and just plain "left," we asked our respondents to place themselves on a 100-point scale of personal left-right locations. If we then aggregate voters by the legislative districts in which they vote, it is not surprising that we find considerable variability in within-district distributions. Some districts show low internal variance, being rather homogeneously left, center or right. But some districts show high polarization in left-right terms.

It is reassuring to be able to show that candidates for National Assembly seats from these districts, when asked to describe levels of consensus or polarization of district sentiment in left-right or other issue terms, tend to give descriptions which show significant association with our independent measures of these distributional features, at least if the issue dimensions are not too novel. Better

yet, we can demonstrate that differences between districts in opinion polarization even with our loose measurements have vital political effects, not only in routine ways on the representation process, but also more dramatically where non-routine political outcomes are concerned. Thus, for example, when the large-scale popular disturbances broke out all over France in 1968, some districts remained quiescent while other districts exploded in heated and sometimes violent demonstrations. Our measures of district differences in left-right polarization have value in "predicting" which districts would explode, despite the fact that the measurements were taken a year before the revolt occurred. These findings would gladden V. O. Key's heart, and they hold hope for some empirical grounding, where what we now call "political risk analysis" is concerned.

Key's second main emphasis in this crucial section of the book shifts from questions of the pro-con distribution of opinion to the question as to who does and does not hold crystallized opinions on any given policy issue. On this theme, it seems likely that he was more than a little contaminated by some of the doctrines concerning the stratification of ideology and opinion that were taking shape in the shop where the book was being organized. Certainly he spent a good deal of time analyzing results from a prefatory question which we had devised to isolate those willing to confess that they had no opinion on some given issue question from those who claimed some true attitude. He emphasizes how useful it is

> "...to visualize the citizenry as divided into those with and without opinions, those with and without involvement, or those with or without information on an issue" (Key, 1964, p. 82).

This is a vision of public opinion, at least as it functions

politically, which we would applaud with the warmest enthusiasm, yet again it is one which much empirical work on electorates even nowadays often ignores. It is hard, for example, not to view with some discomfort coefficients calculated for this or that opinion impact which are based on the total electorate, when one knows they are at best weak averages obscuring major differences in the nature of electoral response between strata of the kinds Key is talking about here. Somehow, in such crude treatments, we intuit that half of the truly political message has been obliterated.

Key uses this vision to focus particularly upon the limited stratum that warrants the label "the attentive public," or what he describes as "a sector of the populace...which on most issues probably amounts to no more than a fifth of the electorate" (p. 85). He returns to this sector repeatedly over the course of the remaining five-sixths of the book, and it becomes a keystone which supports several of those arguments often seen as the distinctive intellectual signature of the work. He is insistent upon the enormous difference it makes politically whether the well-crystallized views of the attentive lead in the same or different directions from those suggested by the inchoate feelings of the less attentive majority.

Most notable, perhaps, is his coupling of the consensus theme with the vision of a thin stratum of the most attentive and informed. He attempts in the first substantive chapter to document the proposition that self-government requires some minimal consensus on the fundamentals of procedure or rules of the game. He explores extant public opinion material with an eye to defining what might be said to

be a true "American consensus." He finds Americans to be generally optimistic and pragmatic but, for reasons he felt had long since been well elucidated by Walter Lippman, not very strong on abstract political principle. If "the system can operate as though a fundamental consensus prevailed" on such principles, he says (p. 52), it is because such beliefs are indeed shared within the attentive public and hence "the governing elite" which is drawn from that public.

All of these discussions do indeed lodge public opinion squarely in "the political context" promised by the preface. Yet as the book wears on, Key remarks repeatedly as to the enormity of the task of disentangling the subtle flows of influence between the inattentive majority, the attentive public, pressure groups and the governors themselves, and expresses frustration at how little we truly know of these complex interactions. Amid this daunting complexity, the message that it is the thin stratum of the most attentive who are the "keepers of the flame" permitting a working political consensus is the one which comes through most clearly, as well as the note which Key uses to end the book.

It is perhaps worth mentioning that the final paragraph, one which rings with eloquence, was decorated in the library copy I reviewed with an obscenity scrawled in the margin, followed by the comment "who would have believed old V.O. was an elitist!" This is followed in turn by a riposte which says "he isn't, you fool: read that last line again."

II

Talk of fools, not to mention elitists, moves us neatly from Public Opinion and American Democracy to Key's final and posthumous work, The Responsible Electorate. Here he sets aside his preoccupation with the macrocosmic and the structural, as well as his diffidence about matters psychological, to make a major pronouncement. "The perverse and unorthodox argument of this little book," he says, "is that voters are not fools" (p. 7). It was a shot heard round the discipline. For one thing, it was a deeply felt Fanfare for the Common Man, and as a last intellectual will and testament was about as bald an assurance that "old V.O." had not gone elitist as could have been written. More seriously, it served to resurrect hopes that some form of rational choice paradigm might not be totally out of touch with the realities of the polling booth.

As we follow this transition, we are inexorably drawn, of course, through the seamless web from the region marked "public opinion" to that marked "elections"; and in our current division of labor here today, that puts me out of bounds, beyond my jurisdiction. But perhaps the local gendarmerie will accept my explanation that we were in such hot pursuit of what V. O. Key truly thought of public opinion that we trespassed inadvertently, and it would be impossible to terminate these remarks sensibly by any other means.

Now one can write an effective history of ideas which registers the impact of this final book upon the thinking of the discipline, without inquiring further as to Key's motivations, or what the master had truly intended to say in either of these books. In general I

prefer such history without a lot of guesswork as to intentions. On the other hand, it is hard to read these two ultimate books in rapid succession without wondering a bit just how Key saw the relationship between the two. At one extreme the second book might be taken as a recantation of the Public Opinion book, with its lengthy discussions of the dismal levels of voter inattention, widespread voter ignorance, and its persistent harping upon the theme that it is within a thin upper stratum of the truly attentive public that most of the meaningful political action takes place, even in a democracy. At the other extreme, it can be argued that there was no disjuncture whatever between the two books in Key's mind, and that The Responsible Electorate was written under a banner saying very clearly "Lest I May Have Been Misunderstood..."

There may be listeners here who know from informal communication with Key at the time which, or what mix, of these situations pertained. But unsullied by more exact information, it seems to me that there was no semblance of a disjuncture of view here, and at the very most a shift of emphasis.

Of course we cannot disentangle much without getting beyond the simplistic phrase "voters are not fools", for it leaves us in a sea of ambiguity. Does this phrase mean to imply "No voter is a fool"? If it were to, then evidence for a major disjuncture of view would be in place, since Key in the Public Opinion book makes clear that some voters behave as fools. But more importantly what do we even mean by the descriptor "fool" in the first place? And what fraction of the voters can act at what level of foolery, so defined, without

disconfirming the sentence "voters are not fools"? Key himself has immediately begun this clarification in his very next sentence, which says

> "To be sure, many individual voters act in odd ways indeed; yet in the large the electorate behaves about as rationally and responsibly as we should expect, given the clarity of the alternatives presented to it and the character of the information available to it." (Key, 1966, p. 7)

The case against disjuncture has as its central exhibit the simple fact that the seed for The Responsible Electorate was already plainly presented in Public Opinion American Democracy. Most of it lies in Chapter 18 entitled "Elections" a chapter divided into three sections. The first two are labelled "Voting and Substantive Issues" and "Nonissue Content of the Vote." Prominent in the former is this passage:

> "The more conscious the American voter is of policy issues and the more aware he is of party policy, the more likely he is to cast a ballot consistent with his policy preferences. This interpretation runs counter to easy generalizations to the effect that the voter is a boob at the mercy of slick operators. Certainly some voters magnificently fulfill that specification, but the motivations that bring many people to a decision about their presidential vote include a policy component." (1964, pp. 461-62)

Key documents this view in several ways, one of the chief of which is a discussion of voters switching party from one presidential election to the next, with a presentation of findings about switchers in various transitions like 1928-32 or 1948-52, arguing that such movement increases harmony between vote and policy preference. This form of data analysis, in the service of this particular message is, of course, the central fare of the posthumous volume: The Responsible Electorate is in the most straightforward and undisguised way a direct

150-page expansion of the half-dozen pages here.

Of course it is true that a zoom lens at this level of magnification is bound to change the bystander's sense of proportion over the broader landscape, even if that broader landscape has actually remained constant. In the Public Opinion book the issue voting section is followed by a section of equal length on the nonissue content of the vote, and there is of course no parallel "on the other hand" introduced in The Responsible Electorate.

It is at just this point in the Public Opinion book, as Key makes the transition from his discussion of "switchers" to the next section, that he may have written something he would have phrased differently a year or two later. Again, I quote:

> "While voters may shift their support from the candidate of one party to that of another for policy reasons, they may also shift for other causes. There is some support for the belief that the group most susceptible to shift through time with the popular tide consists of those individuals completely devoid of policy interests or concerns." (Key, 1964, p. 465)

It is possible that Key, discovering even more life than he had dared expect in the additional "switcher" tables being prepared for the final book, would have liked to have taken back the latter sentence. But this is about the only fodder for recantation that is evident in these pages. All of the other ingredients that gave The Responsible Electorate its special appeal, including the emphasis on the particular rationality of retrospective assessments of incumbent performance, are in view in the earlier book.

In short, while there is no question that Key felt a great need for some corrective emphases in writing The Responsible Electorate, that book does not in itself give cause to believe that he was prepared to dismantle the architectonic view of public opinion in the political process which he had labored to develop in the earlier book. Public opinion may be sharply stratified by information and extent of opinionation; attentive publics may have a unique role in preservation of the democratic rules of the game as well as a special weight in systems of popular representation; and voters may not be fools, all at the same time. The challenge of Key's legacy on public opinion is to promote the kind of subtle inquiry which keeps all of these truths in view at once.

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